The Eavesdroppers

Britain's largest spy network organisation is not MI5 or MI6 but an electronic intelligence network controlled from a country town in the Cotswolds. With the huge US National Security Agency (NSA) as partner, it intercepts and decodes communications throughout the world. Freelance writer Duncan Campbell and Mark Hasenball trace the rise to power of the electronic eavesdroppers. RAF Chickands, between Beddid and Hillesden, could be a pleasant day trip from London. The sixteenth-century priory is open, and you won't be disturbed by overflying aircraft. Instead Chickands is dominated by a giant hilltop monument, a steel circle a quarter mile wide. Not far off, in a long low building, 200 operators of the United States Air Force Security Service sit over radios monitoring the ether from London. The sixteenth century top monolith, their giant 'Steelhenge'.

Chickands is the largest listening post in Britain of the US National Security Agency. NSA is responsible for directing American intelligence from satellites to spy ships. Last summer, former CIA director William Colby told a US Senate Committee that NSA monitored all phone calls to and from the US, intercepted commercial communications, and raided embassies for codebooks. No one is immune, not even America's closest allies. Former NSA analyst Winslow Peck (below) worked in the late sixties at the US Air Force installation near Istanbul, another station in the chain of 12 key NSA sites that includes Chickands. On a recent visit to Britain he described to Time Out top secret lists of monitored UK commercial communications kept at the Turkish site. Called TEXTA, these lists revealed that the UK business communications were apparently being intercepted from eastern England.

Another ex-NSA serviceman, who served three years in Chickands recently, described how British representatives were effectively excluded from checking on NSA work—and how one of two key monitoring controllers were responsible for intercepting communications from France.

NSA is partnered in a worldwide electronic intelligence pact by four other powers: Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. By a 1947 secret agreement, UKUSA, these five English-speaking nations have divided the monitoring of the world's communications between them. Each country's signals intelligence (SIGINT) agency has authority to monitor communications in one area. West of Europe, the Signals Organisation of the UKUSA pact—Government Communications Headquarters, known as GCHQ.

From two modern office blocks on the outskirts of Cheltenham, the directors of GCHQ manage a world-wide network of listening posts. They have directed aircraft and ships into foreign air and sea space to obtain information on their communications and defences. The listening posts are often found in the most remote places—Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore, Oman, Belize, St Helena, the Ascension Islands and Botswana among others. Another base was recently identified in Australia, where after a typhoon hit Darwin, large numbers of RAF personnel were discovered on a nearby off-shore island. The GCHQ network comprises an estimated 50 stations. In 1963 it won a secret battle to take control of all army, air force, and navy monitoring and clandestine radio stations.

GCHQ's director Bill Bonsall, although normally responsible to the Foreign Office, sits on the Joint Intelligence Committee and probably works for Cabinet intelligence chiefs. His predecessor, Sir Leonard Hooper, KCMG, now works in the Cabinet Office after 32 years with GCHQ—a clear indication of the modern pre-eminence of SIGINT. But since the Labour government took power in 1974, GCHQ's secret budget has been reduced, and its listening posts east of Suez considered for closure.

The worldwide intelligence collection by GCHQ provides Britain with a legal right to monitor communications. The Home Office's Radio Technology Directorate carries out several monitoring tasks to keep the airwaves free of commercial and illegal transmissions. The Radio Technology Directorate employs 400 Post Office radio officers throughout Britain to track down an unwanted signal. Its Interference Division traces over 40,000 complaints of interference a year, all for the price of a farm Rally in the local Post Office. With 300 special vans, many equipped with tele- type direction finding equipment and special surveillance equipment, they can track down sources of interference. In important cases, such as the time a local factory was accidentally jamming communications to aircraft landing at Manchester, they have spent six months pinpointing down the source of dangerous interference.

On every wavelength the Composite Signals Organisation was set up in 1963 to bring all clandestine radio and monitoring operations under command of GCHQ. Two Transoceanic stations are within ten miles of Belfast and may be involved in monitoring the waves, using computer controlled radio receivers. At Poundon, near Bicester in Oxfordshire, a well-guarded radio station marked 'Foreign and Commonwealth Office' is guarded miles from the nearest town. Two long sheds inside a fenced-off compound house the transmitters and their radio sets, whilst outside stands one of Mosley's 'Pusher' sets for direction finding, and much other sophisticated equipment.

SIS undercover anti-Nasser station to run the 'Voice of Britain', which relayed the Foreign Office view in opposition to the BBC. The radio side of the British Spy Agencies are apparently cleared by the Commonwealth Signals Organisation (CSO), which is run by the ubiquitous GCHQ.

In the early '60s, according to Peck, two RAF aircraft equipped with electronic intelligence equipment took off from a base on the Caspian Sea, in Iran. The planes and their crew didn't sailing under Swedish colours. These made regular patrols in Russian territorial waters. On one occasion, a British captain took his boat into Leningrad harbour. The author, who had worked in a Royal Navy intelligence unit in Germany, were sentenced to six months imprisonment shortly afterwards for breaking the Official Secrets Act.

Their article also identified a 'chain of monitoring stations from Iran to the Baltic—flagrant breach of the Geneva Convention'. The stations recorded the
-effects when British and American aircraft flew over the borders to trigger a Soviet response. These flights were conducted regularly—"there is no controlling the appetite of the statistical craft" (lcw over the borders to trigger conducted regularly—there is no control). Analysers had budget was only some £5,000,000 two years ago, there is no doubt that most scientific staff are employed by the where—in particular by the Ministry of Defence. All GCHQ headquarters' scientific staff are employed by the Defence Ministry, and after an internal

GCHQ. In 1968 they set up a new company called Racal (Slough) specifically to manufacture secret communications equipment in co-operation with the government. In just four years Racal (Slough)'s turnover grew sixfold. Interestingly, the main development centre of Racal (Slough) is at Tewkesbury, noticeably closer to Cheltenham than Slough.

Another British company to do well out of the boom in electronic espionage is Plessey, who manufacture an aerial system for eavesdropping. One special Plessey aerial—an array of slender posts on a 500 foot pole which can pinpoint the bearing of any signal—was originally developed under a secret GCHQ contract and named "PUSHER".

GCHQ now has an estimated 5000 monitoring stations throughout the world—indeed they now have stations in every Eastern country building up their own surveillance systems. A tew German companies have their own monitoring stations, but the activities of the British government to study and monitor Soviet satellites and public myths which remain out-of-date. NSA, according to a senior ex-diplomat, "is a key intelligence base, our secret weapon to break the crypto secret of our enemies."

Ultra Secret Beginnings

GCHQ's history starts at the Government Code and Cypher School in Cheltenham, Plessey, and its enormous wartime codebreaking effort. At the peak, more than six thousand people worked at Bletchley decoding German codes—this was the Ultra secret that only emerged in detail in 1974. At Hanslope Park north of Bletchley and Barnet, in north London, a secret unit codenamed 'SCU-3' co-ordinated the monitoring and locationing of enemy secret transmitters. A key monitoring site for Ultra was Cheltenham, east of Bletchley, still the important US base today.

During the War a series of computers called Colossus were devised to solve the daily-changing key to the German 'Enigma' machine. Even now the government refuses to reveal how the Colossus machines were built, although it is known that the 1940 machines read information from paper tape at a rate five times faster than is normal today.

The immense secrecy which still surrounds the Bletchley operations may be due to the development of decoding techniques of value today. Britain's cracking of the Enigma cipher was not revealed for 30 years because electronic versions of the Enigma cipher were being sold to Third World countries by European firms such as Crypto AG of Switzerland—and thus were an easy target for GCHQ and NSA codebreakers. Headquarters was formed at Eastcote in the north west of London. In 1953 it moved to Cheltenham, and consolidated its control of Britain's communications intelligence services.

The tradition of having the biggest and best in computing goes back to the original Colossus. On numerous occasions, new generations of computer equipment from the US have been delivered in quantity to Cheltenham before being 'officially' marketed in Britain. With at least five major computer installations, GCHQ has the electricity requirement of a medium sized town.